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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000023

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2020
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: NEW YEAR BRINGS NEW CHALLENGES FOR IRAQI REFUGEES
IN SYRIA

REF: A. (A) DAMASCUS 00008
[1](#)B. (B) 09 DAMASCUS 776

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1.(C) SUMMARY: UNHCR officials, representatives of U.S.-based NGOs, and Iraqi refugees consider continued uncertainty about the security situation in Iraq and the state of Iraqi-Syrian bilateral relations, upcoming Iraqi parliamentary elections, and the continued depletion of refugees' savings the most salient issues facing Iraqi refugees in Syria as the new year begins. Over the course of recent meetings with Codel Hastings (ref A) and Staffdel Marcus, UNHCR officials stated President Bashar al-Asad told them he welcomed international assistance for refugees in the face of these challenges but preferred receiving funding for schools over direct monetary assistance and believed Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had a responsibility to pay for school construction here. Vice Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad echoed the president's criticism of Maliki, calling on the Iraqi government to stop viewing Iraqi refugees as "traitors" and provide more assistance. Miqdad also declared that the SARG welcomed international NGOs working "transparently" in Syria but viewed the Sudanese government's experience with NGOs who had criticized the Khartoum regime as "an eye opener." Iraqi refugees, for their part, generally do not believe they will return home soon due to ongoing violence and instability in Iraq, and requested continued USG commitment to Iraqi refugees in Syria through at least 2011, if not longer. U.S.-based NGOs reported continued obstacles in working in Syria's difficult operating environment, but stated they are making progress by constructing personal relationships with SARG officials. END SUMMARY.

ASAD WEIGHS IN REGARDING IRAQI REFUGEES

[1](#)2. (C) During a January 7 meeting with Congressman Hastings (reftel), President Asad said the time has come for the Iraqi government to assist Iraqi refugees in Syria. He argued that with a surplus of tens of billions of dollars the Iraqi government must take some of the responsibility for its citizens in Syria. Asad said the Iraqi government contributes nothing for Iraqis here, while the Syrian government extends the same services to Iraqis as it does to its own people. In the same vein, Vice Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad told us January 9 the Maliki government "must stop treating refugees like traitors" and start providing funding for refugee services.

[1](#)3. (C) Despite the souring of Syrian-Iraqi bilateral relations that these comments highlight, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Deputy Country Representative Philippe Leclerc told us Asad recently reaffirmed to them his support for Iraqi refugees living in Syria. The president stressed, as he has repeatedly since the two countries withdrew their respective ambassadors from Damascus and Baghdad in late August, that Iraqi refugees would not be affected by deteriorating bilateral relations.

His remarks mirrored those of other SARG officials who have reassured UNHCR that Iraqi refugees will not suffer as a result of troubled Syrian-Iraqi relations, and that Iraqi refugees will not be forced to leave Syria until they feel secure in returning to Iraq. "We are ready to pack them and send them back in one evening, but we will not do that because it is not a humanitarian solution," Miqdad told us.

¶4. (C) Asad also informed Congressman Hastings and UNHCR officials that while he welcomed international assistance for Iraqi refugees in Syria, he preferred funds for constructing schools over direct monetary assistance. NGOs estimate that more than 30,000 Iraqi students are studying in Syrian public schools this year, putting a drain on SARG resources. Miqdad said the USG should provide monetary support to Syria for Iraqi refugees, but added "the UN channel" is the best way to support Syria's efforts "because your Congress would not allow direct assistance to Syria." While SARG officials have estimated the number of Iraqi refugees at between 1.2 and 1.5 million in the past, UNHCR officials report SARG officials have begun consistently citing 800,000 as the number of Iraqi refugees in the country. (Note: Currently, over 218,000 Iraqis have registered with UNHCR as refugees. End note.)

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2011

¶5. (C) UNHCR officials stated they did not see the possibility of a significant return of Iraqi refugees to their homeland until at least 2011. "There is continued uncertainty among Iraqi refugees because of the bombings in Iraq, the upcoming elections, and lack of basic services like electricity," UNHCR Country Representative Renata Dubini related. "Most of them will not be going back for some

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time," she opined. Refugees themselves made the same point in a January 7 roundtable discussion and a January 9 town hall meeting, and requested continued USG commitment to Iraqi refugees in Syria through at least 2011 if not longer.

¶6. (C) Dubini and Leclerc said they are concerned about continued funding for Iraqi refugee programs in Syria past 2010 due to factors such as donor fatigue. UNHCR is planning on launching a \$166 million regional appeal for assistance for Iraqi refugees in Syria on January 18. Miqdad is scheduled to speak at the event. "This is a good sign because it means that the Syrian government is cooperating with us in seeking assistance for refugees, and we didn't always know that this would be the case," Leclerc said. However, Dubini and Leclerc conceded the \$166 million is "ambitious" and stated they are counting on only about a third of that amount.

IRAQI REFUGEES REQUEST CONTINUED USG COMMITMENT

7.(C) During a roundtable discussion with Congressman Hastings, Iraqi refugee women working as outreach volunteers stated they were grateful for international and SARG assistance but were worried about continued commitment from the international community. "Our funds are being depleted, our young men are dropping out of schools to try to find work to support their families, and our people are becoming depressed. This is a catastrophe for our community," one woman stated. Other refugees described increasing rates of social problems like post-traumatic stress disorder and domestic violence.

¶8. (C) At a January 9 town hall meeting with Staffdel Marcus, only a handful of the more than 50 refugees in attendance raised their hands when asked whether they believed they would return to Iraq. "I could never go back. My experiences there were not as bad as some others, but they were not easy to get through. I wish I could erase my memories there," one young woman said. Another woman whose husband is missing said her children were too traumatized to return to their homeland, and she worried the SARG would not allow them to remain in Syria "forever." Other refugees said

they were waiting to see what happens after planned parliamentary elections in March, and still others stated they worried about the aftermath of a drawdown of US troops from Iraq.

¶9. (C) Many refugees added they believed the USG had a special responsibility to assist Iraqi refugees. "It's important that the country that invaded us take responsibility for its effects. We had normal lives and suddenly we found ourselves here as refugees," one woman declared. Another explained resettlement to Western countries was not a viable option for most Iraqi refugees. "Even if it were possible, a lot of Iraqis don't want to go to the West and adapt to a different culture," she explained. "Some of us will never be able to return to Iraq, and most of us will not go to Western countries, so more has to be done for Iraqis who will continue to be in Syria, because we are a big burden on the government's resources here," another refugee concluded.

SARG VIEWS NGO ACTIONS IN SUDAN AS "EYE OPENER"

¶10. (C) Representatives of two of the three largest U.S.-based NGOs assisting Iraqi refugees in Syria - International Medical Corps (IMC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) - as well as the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) - discussed the difficult operating environment for international NGOs in Syria with Congressman Hastings. IRC Country Representative Gordana Ivkovic-Grujic described the 14-month process her NGO endured to gain SARG approval for its "Livelihood Training Program" for Iraqi refugees. "The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) told us to go to the MFA, the MFA told us to go to the Ministry of Education," she said, noting the challenge of navigating the SARG bureaucracy. Ivkovic-Grujic said her experience had convinced her Syria is "among the most difficult operating environments in the world for NGOs." "Now I only have four months to implement a project we asked for approval 14 months ago," she added.

¶11. (C) The IRC heard rumors several months ago project approvals and visas were being held up for the aid organization due to the fact it had been kicked out of Sudan by the Sudanese government (ref B). Miqdad appeared to confirm these rumors. He termed the Sudanese government's experience with international NGOs "an eye opener for Syria," and said the behavior of NGOs in Sudan "was a setback" for their operations in Syria. Miqdad said NGOs in Sudan had

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moved beyond providing humanitarian assistance and had begun political activities critical of the government. "NGOs are not supposed to be biased and this opened our eyes," he related. He stressed the SARG is "happy American NGOs are operating here transparently," but said each NGO would be reviewed "on a case-by-case basis" before it is allowed to operate and pursue specific projects in Syria.

¶12. (C) Despite these operating difficulties, the NGO representatives noted progress in the environment for international NGOs working in Syria. While two years ago there were only a handful of foreign NGOs operating in the country, today there are approximately 14. "The key to being successful here is building personal relationships, and that takes time and patience. But overall, despite all the frustration, it's better here than it was in 2007," one NGO representative said.

¶13. (C) Comment: Notwithstanding the very real difficulties Iraqi refugees face, the SARG's response to an influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons has generally been commendable. NGOs do contend with a challenging operating environment; we will continue advocating for fewer restrictions on the number and activities of organizations working here.

HUNTER